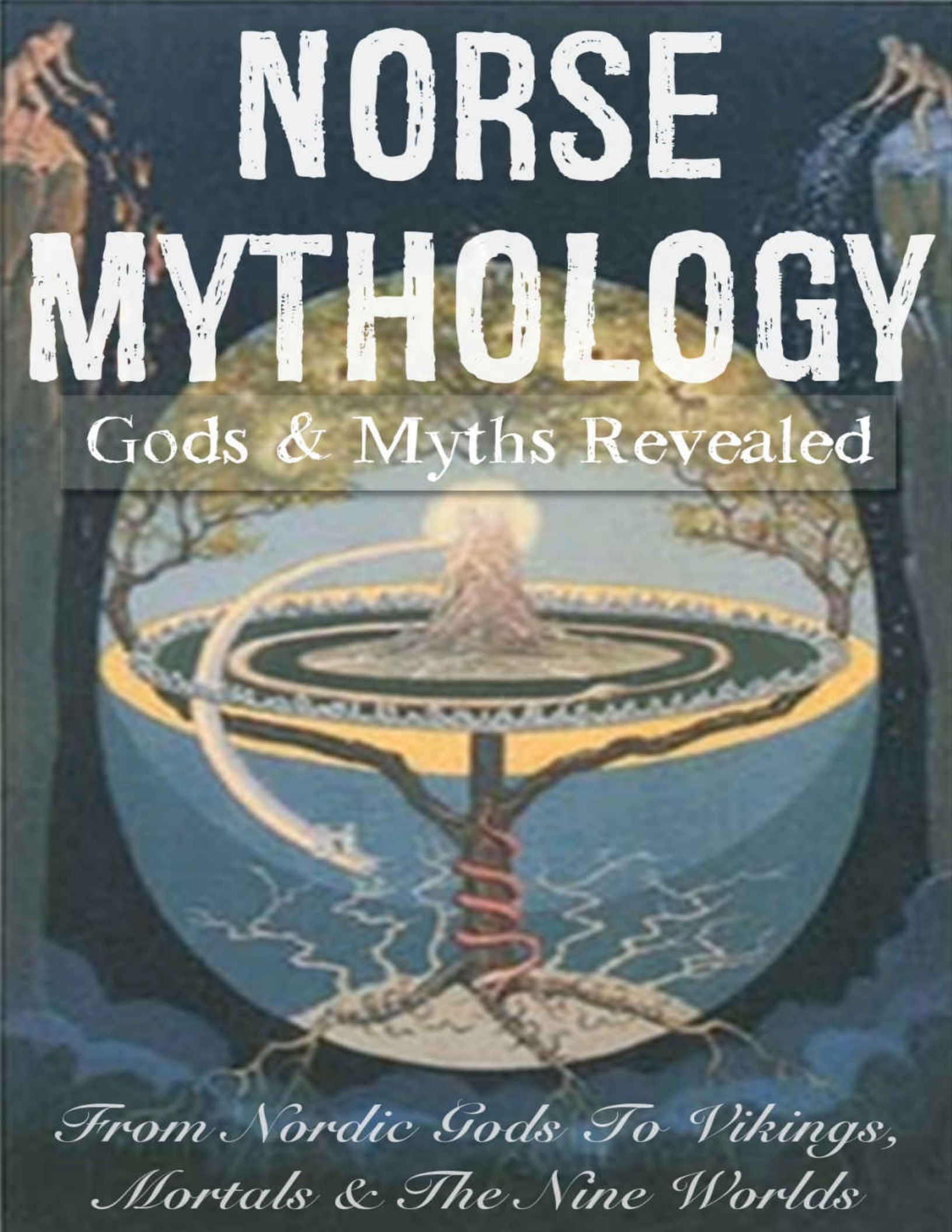
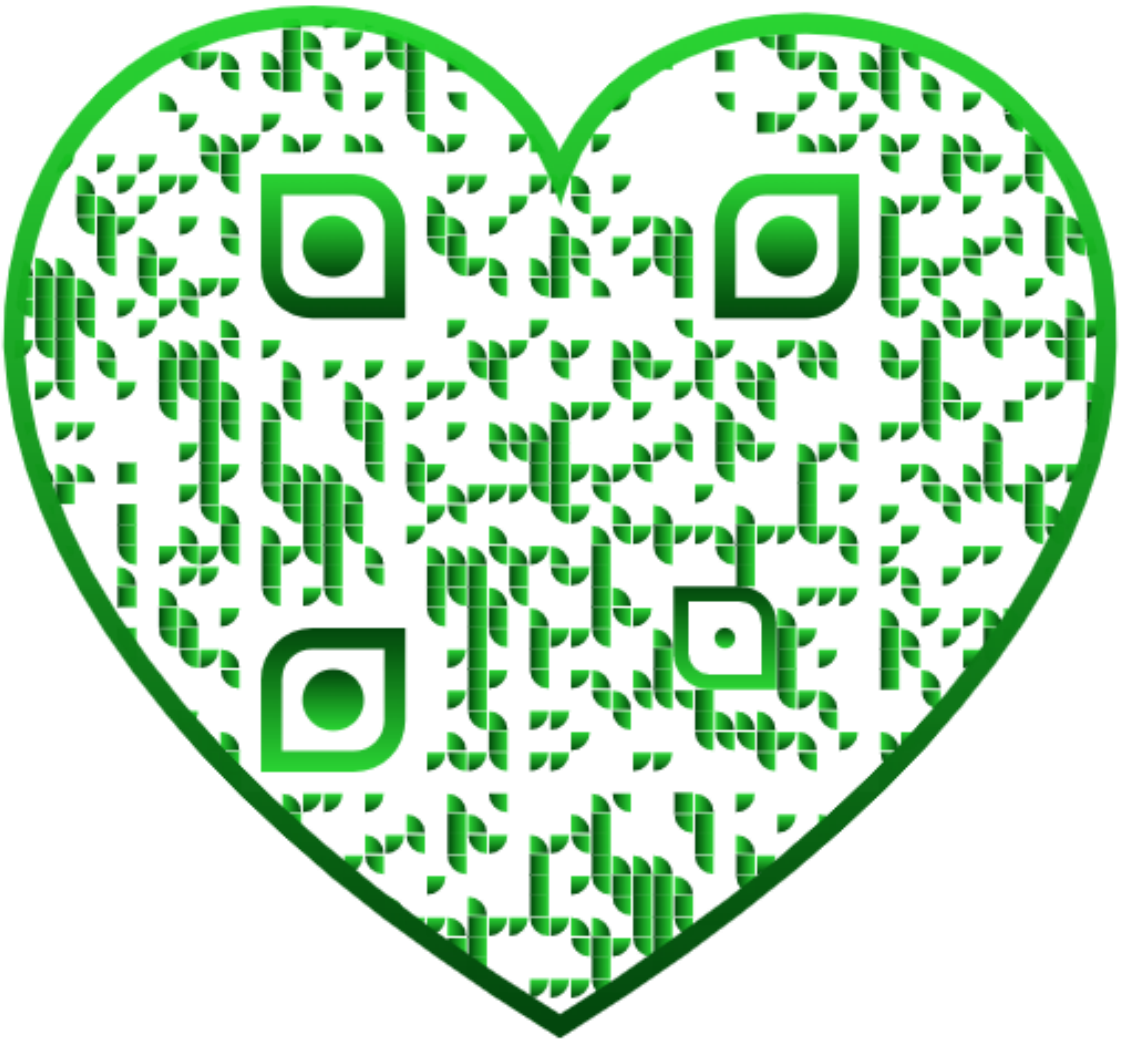
NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Gods & Myths Revealed



From Nordic Gods To Vikings, Mortals & The Nine Worlds



Norse Myth:

Gods & Myths Revealed—Nordic Gods, Vikings, Mortals and the Nine Worlds of Scandinavian Folklore

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Introduction

Welcome! First of all, thank you and congratulations for downloading this book *Norse Myth: Gods & Myths Revealed—Nordic Gods, Vikings Mortals & The Nine Worlds of Scandinavian Folklore*. I really appreciate you putting your trust in me. I am truly convinced that this book will provide you with the value and information you are looking for.

“Better to fight and fall than live without hope.” *Volsunga Saga*, Chapter 12

What do you think about when you think of a Viking? A tall, blonde, battle-hardened warrior? Perhaps, but there is more to the noble, ancient society than just weapons and armor. And in the following pages you will discover just that—a brief history of ancient Scandinavia, a harsh and often cruel world of bitter winters, barren fields and far-flung sea journeys. A people who not only adventured far and wide on the seas, but also lived a simple life as farmers. You will learn about the gods and goddesses of the Vikings, of their place in the society and the traditions that sustained the lore for centuries. And you will discover the strength of the Vikings, the “raiders of the sea”.

Thanks again for downloading this book, I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 1—The History of the North Men

Early Norse History

Born of the land they inhabited, the crags and fjords and interminable winter, mythology and folk tales of ancient Scandinavia were dark and foreboding, violent and bloody.... But they also were full of hope and the odd humorous tale here and there. Think Loki. A proud and fierce people living in a dangerous and cold land, the North Men or "Norsemen" were determined, just as any other ancient culture was, to explain the existence of the natural world, birth, life and death, and ultimately the meaning of life itself. For the "Vikings", the "raiding over the seas" peoples, it resulted in a colorful and sometimes unusual collection of sagas that we are still fascinated with.

Ah, the Vikings—with television programs and movies dedicated to the tall, blonde, fierce warriors, they have become much romanticized. But life was not romantic in the era from which the sagas come. Even the country that they lived in seemed ready to kill them at every turn, with more winter than summer and no real soil with which to farm and other perils. But somehow they persevered, keeping hope with the tales told by the *skalds* or poets, and the world is richer for it.

Populating what is now the southern Scandinavian Peninsula, the islands of the Baltic Sea and Germany between the Rhine and the Vistula, the Norse or Teutonic tribes warred constantly for land and power, but one thing they shared was their religious beliefs. Theirs was not a mono-theistic religion by any means. Like the Egyptians, it was a polytheistic religion with many Gods and Goddesses and minor magical beings. And also like the Egyptians, much of it was regionalized, so that there are several spellings for the Gods' names and each tribe observed rituals in a slightly different way.

Warring seems to be one of the central themes when we think of the Vikings and rightly so. If they were not battling amongst themselves for the better piece of waterfront, they were forced to venture outside of their realm out of necessity: the land had a very short growing season, poor, rocky soil and long harsh winters; and was over-populated for the most part. Every man, woman and child was expected to be able to handle weapons. It may have been hard, but it produced a daring, adventurous and aggressive culture for about three or four centuries before the Christians arrived.

Strongly connected to the land, religious practices were held in sacred places—atop rocky hillsides, in sacred groves and glens. Each tribe also would designate holy wells, rocks and trees as they saw fit. Not all rituals were held outdoors, though. Wooden temples built in the same style as the longhouses and halls have been uncovered. It is also known that the temples had strict rules the faithful were expected to follow, such as no blood could be shed inside a temple or weapons were banned.

The design of the temples is interesting. All temples and shrines were laid out on a north-south axis with north being the direction the people would pray in. Wooden posts with human faces carved on them to represent the deities were common. Also, the temples were protected by v-shaped fences. Scholars know that the three primary deities and therefore the most common temples were to Thor, Odin and Freya.

Along with the facing north for prayer, it is known that animal and human sacrifice using ceremonial flint daggers was done in the earliest times. In later years, wood, metal or even bread replicas replaced the live blood offerings. Music was also part of ritual, with *lurs*, the four foot long sinew horns, being played to offset the rites and prayers.

The Vikings also were known for the finest ships and weapons in Europe at that time (750 A.D. to 1050 A.D.). Not only expert sailors, they also were famed for their abilities as horsemen. Whether a warrior or a bard, for all of them luck was the most desirable wish. Even when it came to planning a raid, the warriors would choose their leader for his “battle-luck”. And when Christians began to make their way to the villages, Vikings tried to not transport a priest or monk on their ship believing it would bring bad luck. The ultimate expression of this was the unlucky priest aboard during a storm—the superstitious crew would toss him overboard without hesitation to rid their ship of the bad spirits.

For one thousand years the Norse worshipped only their Gods, the cult of Thor being the dominant group. Each tribe had their own special rituals, festivals and methods of worship but the Gods and Goddesses and their domains were the same throughout the tribes. Like Egyptians, the names of the Gods were sometimes regionally different.

Conversion to Christianity beginning in the Middle Ages almost wiped out the Norse religion. It was only through the preservation efforts in the Scandinavian

countries that we still have the sagas and epics to enjoy and take inspiration from in modern culture.

Viking Lifestyle

Though mainly thought of as a sea-faring people, most Norse lived on farms of a sort. Implements of the time were iron, with sickles and hoes having been discovered at archeological digs. The ground was not particularly fertile, but most managed to cultivate crops of oats, barley and wheat. These grains would have dual use: they would be ground into flour for bread or to the grade to make porridge, some would have been used for brewing the ales and meads used for celebrations, and they would have served as feed for the various animals.

Domesticated animals included sheep, pigs, cattle, geese, chickens and goats. Self-sustaining, they would have used the manure from the animals to fertilize their crops. As is the norm even today, autumn was the time of harvest and also when an animal may be chosen for slaughter. This served both to provide meat for the winter and to ensure that there was enough feed to see the herd through that long, cold season.

Housing was typically a long, box-shaped structure built of wood, stone or blocks of turf, whatever was available locally. Thatched rooves and walls made of wattle (a mix of woven sticks covered with mud to keep the elements out). The floors were often dug below ground level and scholars believe this was to keep out drafts in the winter months.

It was common for a home to be one shared use room. Only the wealthy had more than that. Furniture would have been sparse. Not even a toilet would have been used; instead, families would share the use of a cesspit for their daily toilet habits and wash in a communal bucket or even go to a nearby river. Villages were collections of these houses grouped closely together on narrow streets.

Jobs such as collecting wood for the ever-burning fire, weaving cloth for clothing and baking the daily bread would have consumed most women’s days. Although there are stories of famous shield maidens battling shoulder to shoulder with the male warriors, roles were more traditional.

And you can forget the image of the armor-wearing Viking, at least as the normal garb. Everyday people wore clothes common to most culture of the time, like the English and the Scots. Men wore tunics and trousers and close-fitting felt caps or

metal helmets. If he was a warrior by trade, a man would wear chain link shirts over leather padding and usually a conical metal helmet with nose and cheek pieces. Helmets with wings and horns were rare among true fighting men: these types of helmets were mainly used for religious rituals. Village women wore long ankle-length dresses with aprons to protect them. They would have had wide-necked bodices and elbow-length sleeves. They would also wear jackets and openwork caps made of horsehair or wool. Many fabrics were available, such as wool, linen and animal skins were the fabrics used.

Chapter 2—The Story-Telling Tradition

Where the Stories Come From

Few written documents were created or found to inform us of the true Viking mythologies and folk tales. They were like so many North American Native Tribes in that they relied on the oral tradition to pass on the stories. Information was passed down by word of mouth. Their *skalds* or Druidic bards were the keepers of the legends and even genealogy and history. Skalds were recognized for their skill at poetry. They were responsible for spreading the myths and sagas as well. Skaldic poetry was long, epic and filled with imagery and history.

What has been preserved and is best-known comes from two works collectively called the *Eddas.* Composed, it is thought, in Iceland between 1000 A.D. and the 13th century, the Eddas also includes much earlier tales. One collection is the poetry and one the prose.

Singularly, the term *edda* has been adapted by scholars. The etymology or origins of the word is up for debate—some attribute it to a Norse word that meant “great-grandmother” while another holds that it translates to “poetry”.

Whatever the origins, the *Eddas* are the most extensive source for Norse mythology. The first part is dedicated to the usual: creation, destruction and rebirth themes, while the second lays out the lives and legends of the heroes and heroines of their world.

There are also pictorial symbols and extensive artefacts that give us their legends as well. Carved in Christian churches, they can be found hiding amidst the orthodox images. Sacred carvings were integral within their own temples and religious observances long before the Christians built churches. Done on monolithic stones, they were written in *runes*, the Norse magical, sacred alphabet. Pictures were also used, most often with the images depicting the central themes of Viking life—ships, horses, sun wheels, trumpeters, charioteers, axes and so on.

Norse Religion and Magic

The Norse pantheon was not the only religious group the Vikings worshipped. As with all ancient belief systems, many different magical groups were recognized as

being between humans and Gods. *Landvaettir* or land spirits were believed to be powerful caretakers of the Earth. Offerings were made to them in caves, on hilltops and at other natural formations. The landvaettir were even respected when ships returned from voyages. The grotesque and menacing dragon head mastheads that adorned the fronts of every Viking warship were actually removable. To ensure the landvaettir were not frightened as the ships approached land, the crews would take down the mastheads, then make port.

Vikings had a lot in common with the ancient Egyptians when it came to the temples. Like the Egyptians, Vikings employed full-time priests to live in them. The Norse world was steeped in magic and mysticism too and thus priests were chosen for their ability to "see". Like the Oracle at Delphi in Greek tradition, these *vitki* or wise ones were believed to foretell the future. They could be called upon to predict how a raid may go for example. All priests were expected to attend to the daily needs of the villagers and perform rites during festivals.

As I have already said, magic was part of the culture. Part of the everyday fabric of life in any Norse village, magic was as much a part of life as was praying to the gods. The word for sorcery was *seior* and those who practiced it were revered within the villages. Seior practitioners or *volvur* were of both genders, although most were female. In fact, most often they were elderly women with no family attachments or distractions. The practice included shamanism, sorcery and prophecy and men who dared to explore it often carried a stigma.

Generally, they were held in high esteem and were believed to possess such power that even Odin consulted in them when something challenged him. It is important to note that throughout Germanic history, women were revered as holy, naturally imbued with magical power and the ability to prophesize. They attracted many followers and were called on in times of crisis (and were paid handsomely for their services). They were not considered to be harmless, however. The respect shown them was due to the power they wielded.

Another type of magic that was practiced was called *spa*. This involved determining the way in which the Norn (the triad of witches who controlled one's destiny) would direct one's life. There was also the practice of *galdr*. Meaning literally "to sing", it referred to the magical songs a seer would sing. It is unique in that it was the main practice of male practitioners of the art.

Finally, runic magic was part of the Norse magical observances. Again, largely the world of male practitioners (a *rynstr*), many leading Norse men learned them as a

part of their formal education. Making a rune involved the cutting of the magical alphabet letters into wood or even stone tiles, then tossing them and the seer reading the message within. It is curious to note that none of the runes discovered included curved lines. Incantations were also part of the ritual.

Modern day people tend to think of magic in terms of black and white, good and bad. But the Vikings viewed it a little differently, describing unmanly magic (battle related and practiced by the gods like Odin) and high magic (ritualistic and only practiced by women).

The Norse religious rituals encompassed the solstices and equinoxes, as it was an Earth religion. But the bulk of such practices were for more every day occurrences and concerns: plowing, harvesting, birth, marriage, death, travelling and business (trading). An example of a personal ritual was the naming of a child. Not until it was certain that a new-born would live was the baby sprinkled with water and given a name.

Chapter 3—The Norse Pantheon

As with so many so-called pagan religions, the Norse had not one god but several, both male and female, as well as a belief in one that was a hermaphrodite. The gods and goddesses listed below went by many variations on the spelling of their names but they were universally recognized for their gifts. They were divided into two groups: the Vanir and the Aesir (a blanket term for all the warrior gods and goddesses and the keepers of the dead).

Aegir—Also called "Alebrewer", this god was a Vanir whose domain was the sea and all that entailed. Sailors, sunken treasure, wind and waves all were at the whim of Aegir. He was also god of gold, prosperity and brewing (hence "Alebrewer"). Wed to Ran (below), he lived with her and their nine daughters the "Undines" in an extravagant hall beneath the ocean. It is interesting to note that with Ran, Aegir is one of the most written about of the gods. And they seemed to divide the benevolent and malevolent tasks: he was portrayed as the gracious host while sailors feared her, believing she was responsible for drownings.

Audhumla—"The Nourisher" or the "Rich Hornless Cow", she was like the Viking version of Mother Earth. Depicted as a cow because of the life-giving aspects of that animal (motherhood and sustenance), she governed motherhood, child-rearing and affairs of the home.

Balder—This god was sometimes called "The Bright One". An Aesir Sun god, Balder was the child of Odin and Frigg. In myth, sacred wells were made by his horse's hooves as he galloped across the earth. His domain was broad, covering light, advice, beauty, reconciliation, gentleness, reincarnation, wisdom, harmony and happiness.

Braggi—Another son of Odin and Frigg, Braggi was the literacy god: poetry and eloquence were his responsibility. When a Viking passed on to Valhalla (like Christianity's Heaven), Braggi met them at the gates with a song of their many noble and heroic deeds in battle. He was the god of wit, cunning, wisdom, the arts and patron of skalds and minstrels.

Forseti—The son of Balder and Nanna, this god was in charge of justice, the laws, peace, fairness and good judgment.

Freya—A seer, Freya was the premier goddess. Also known as “The Lady” or “Great Goddess”, she was the sister of Freyr and daughter of Njord. Leader of the Valkyries (see below), Freya was also the inspiration or muse for all sacred poetry. She was the goddess of love, animals (especially cats), fire, childbirth, witchcraft, wealth, wisdom, fertility, the Moon, the sea, death, protection and more.

Frigg—An Aesir mother goddess, Odin’s wife and Queen of all goddesses, Frigg was a shape-shifter. She was “Knower of All Things” and held dominion over independence, childbirth, cunning, cleverness, physical love, wisdom, foresight, children, fertility, magic and more.

Gefion—“The Giver”, she was the central fertility goddess. Gefion was the goddess that virgins went to after death and she was responsible for magic, luck, crops, the land, fortune, etc.

Gulliveig—A Vanir, this goddess was also recognized as a sorceress and held dominion over magic, seers, prophecies and healing.

Heimdall—The Vanir god of light and the rainbow, he was also known as “The White God”. The now popularly famous guardian of Bifrost (since the *Thor* movies), Heimdall was god over beginnings and endings, the dawn, and defender of the world against evil.

Hela—The “Queen of the Dead”, Hela ruled Niflheim, a sort of Norse underworld. As such, she was responsible for dark magic and revenge.

Hermod—An Aesir god and a son of Odin, Hermod ruled honor and bravery.

Holda—This goddess had two faces, in a sense. If she was referred to as Holda, she was benign; if she was called Bertha, on the other hand, she was not. Her domain was the winter, witchcraft, fate, karma, dark magic and revenge.

Idunn—The Aesir goddess of immortality, she also ruled over beauty, youth, longevity and so on.

Loki—“The Trickster” of legend, “The Father of Lies” and “Shape-Changer”, Loki is infamous in the Norse pantheon. Born of a giant and a blood brother of Odin, Loki is known for his good looks and attractiveness to the female sex but was also considered dangerous because he was so unpredictable. In keeping with his reputation as a trickster, he is god of earthquakes and all manner of troubles. The

realms of cunning, stealth, wit, deceit, agility, lies, and dark magic are also his.

Mimir—An Aesir goddess, she was considered to be very wise and thus ruled wisdom, knowledge, the arts and teaching. In nature she was ruler of sacred pools and springs.

Nanna—An Aesir goddess also known as "The Great Mother", she was associated with the Moon, as well as love and gentleness.

Nehallennia—An Earth mother and Goddess of plenty, seafaring, the fishery, she was represented in art with a cornucopia.

Nerthus—Another Earth mother and a fertility goddess, she was ruler of peace and the Spring. As well, Norse people looked to her for purification and witchcraft.

Njord—A Vanir god of the sea, he was ruler of fire and the winds. With his domain of the sea, he looked after fishing and sailors. But he also looked after prosperity, livestock, the land, luck on journeys and stubbornness.

Norns (The)—Many ancient mythological canons have a triad of witches or Fates, and the Norse world was no different. The Norns were also called the Fates and were believed to live at the Well of Urd near the World Tree in Asgard. Each witch had a name and domain: Urd (past and destiny); Verthando (the present); and Skuld (the future).

Odin—The most well-known in popular North American culture next to Thor, Odin went by Wodin as well as Othinn. The Aesir King of the Gods, he was "Allfather" or "Great Father" in Norse myths. All-seeing, all-knowing, he was also a shape-shifter. It is interesting to note that he was believed to make men go insane with anger in battle, known as "*battle-fetter*" or battle panic. Odin was believed to have given three different types of madness to man: the warrior in battle; the seer in a trance; and the poet in creative form. Remember that the gods and goddesses were often attributed with human feelings and personalities and Odin was thought to be subtle, crafty, mysterious and dangerous. He was depicted as having two ravens, two wolves and the Valkyries with him in many works of art. The god of royalty, warriors, sorcerers and poets, he was feared by the commoners. His domain was far reaching, and included magic, wisdom, law, war and medicine.

Ran—Wife of Aegir, "The Ravager" as she was also known was a Vanir goddess of great power over the sea. She was attributed with drowning men, causing terror with

her storms.

Sif—An Aesir goddess and an Earth mother, she was Thor's wife and noted for her beautiful hair. Her domain was the harvest, fertility, times of plenty and generosity.

Sigyn—A lesser known goddess now, she was Loki's wife and goddess of fidelity and loyalty.

Sjofma—The goddess of love.

Skadi—The goddess also known as "Harm", her domain was the winter, the mountains, hunting, dark magic and revenge.

Thor—An Aesir god, Thor was also called "The Thunder". He was the champion of all other gods and goddesses and protector of the common people. Always depicted in battle dress, his domain included law and order, strength, thunder and lightning, weather, courage, wars and battle.

Tyr—An Aesir god who was hailed as the bravest of the gods. Always honest, his domain was justice and the law. Any victory was believed to have been a gift from Tyr. Bravery, self-sacrifice and all things chivalrous and noble were under his care.

Ull—Sometimes known as the "Death God", Ull was actually god of beauty, hunting, nobility and so on.

Valkyries (The)—The thirteen female warrior attendants of Odin. Viking warriors believed they were responsible for how a battle turned out. They were also called "The Choosers of the Slain". To be chosen by them meant you would reach Valhalla. Shape-changers who were depicted as battle-dressed goddesses on flying mounts, swan maidens, angels of death, or mare-women, they were fearlessness personified, and reigned over war and death.

Vanir (The)—The other race of gods, they reigned over fertility first and foremost.

Volund—As metal tools and weapons were integral to the life of the Norse, it is only fitting that there is a god dedicated to that. Volund was also ruler over healing, strength and cunning.

Ymir—The first Frost Giant, Ymir was viewed as pure evil, brutal and violent.

Chapter 4—The Nine Realms

Unlike Christianity, there wasn't just Heaven, Earth and Hell but nine worlds divided into three levels—Asgard, Midgard and Nidhoze. The World Tree connected them all.

Niflheim

The first world created according to Norse mythology, Niflheim was also the largest. The "World of Fog and Mist", it was also the darkest and coldest of the worlds and was where Hvergelmir or the bubbling, boiling spring was located. The oldest of three sacred wells, it was protected by Nidhug the dragon.

The geography people of the North lived in and knew is intricately connected to their view of the sacred lands. Especially when it comes to Niflheim as it was the source of the eleven rivers that ran through their lands and where all the coldest water came from. The World Tree stretched one of its three roots deep into Niflheim to draw water from the spring.

Muspelheim

Think of the landscape again. Volcanic activity was not unheard of and thus infuses this "Land of Fire". It was farthest south in the scheme of things. Burning hot and filled with lava, flames, gases, and ash, it was the home of the Fire Giants and demons and ruled by a giant called Surt.

Giants were a race separate from mankind and the gods. Surt in fact was the sworn enemy of the Aesir. The Vikings had an apocalyptic version of how the world would end in Ragnarok, the Norse equivalent to Christian End of Days. Legend held that Surt would instigate the end by attacking Asgard, turning it into a flaming wasteland.

Asgard

Most are familiar with this realm, especially with successful fantasy movies from the last few years featuring Thor, Loki and the All-Father. Asgard is located in the middle of the realms, and is the home of the gods and goddesses. The Aesir or male gods live there with the Asynjur or female goddesses.

Ruled by the All-Father, Odin, and his Queen, Frigg, inside Asgard's gates lies the most famous of Norse symbols, Valhalla. Part of popular culture now, Valhalla was the goal of every proud Norse warrior. If his deeds in this life had been noble and many, and if he died on the battlefield, he would enter Valhalla, to live in glory forever among the gods and goddesses.

Akin to Heaven, Asgard was the realm where those who died violently, warruiors and righteous men went after death. It is very interesting to note there is nothing in the writings or sagas to suggest that women couldn't have the same honor.

The grandeur of Asgard was spectacular. There were 540 doors each so wide the stories go, that 800 warriors could enter side by side. The epitome of the warrior's afterlife, the roof was covered in golden shields and the walls were made of wooden spear shafts.

Interestingly, the Norse did not view the masculine as the primary war god—in fact, half of the dead would go to Odin and half to Freya. She had first pick as they entered.

As the sun rose in the real world every morning, Vikings believed that it was Freya, Odin and the warriors putting on their armor and readying for battle. Every day they would walk to the plains of Asgard and fight. In Viking Valhalla, it didn't matter if you were wounded, lost an arm or a leg, because very evening you would be restored at a great banquet.

The intricacies of the evening meal was specifically described in the folk lore. A giant magical roast pig that replenishes itself after each slice is taken was feasted on with accompanying steins of Saehrimnir. This godly mean was produced by Heidrun, a mystical giant goat who stood on the roof of Valhalla and at the leaves from the World Tree for nourishment. This gave its milk the restorative qualities. If you can imagine it, the piece de resistance was the Valkyries served the meal.

Within Asgard was also Helheim, the domain of the goddess Hel. For her part, she was responsible for the criminals, those who had died from illness or old age. Oath-breakers and secret killers, the two most unforgiveable of crimes in Norse society, were also condemned to Hel's kingdom.

Midgard

Literally meaning "middle" realm, this is the world of both gods and mankind.

Located in the center of the nine worlds, Midgard is connected to Asgard by the Bifrost, a mythical rainbow bridge. You can see again how the ancients interpreted natural phenomena with mythic explanations.

Midgard was surrounded by an immense impassable ocean. In the ocean it was believed a gigantic sea serpent lived, encircling the world. A common thread again amongst some cultures, the serpent was like the Ouroborus of Egyptian culture, biting its own tail (the representation of the continuous circle of life, death and rebirth that many cultures believed in).

Creation had to be explained and the Vikings believed that Odin and his brothers Vili and Ve created humans from trees: man from an Ash log and woman from an Elm.

Jotunheim

Giants played a large role in Norse lore and Jotunheim was their home. “Jotuns” as they were called were the sworn enemies of the Aesir.

The environment of Jotunheim was not a welcoming one, consisting of mostly rocks, dense forests and harsh wilderness. Created as it was from the corpse of the first giant, Ymir, in some tales, it was understandably vast and harsh. With no land to farm, Jotuns were hunters and fishers.

War was a constant in Jotunheim, with the Jotuns and the Aesir in battle eternally. Strangely enough, myth allowed for the occasional love affair between a Jotun and an Aesir—Odin and Thor both had giants as lovers at one point in their lives. And Loki came from Jotunheim but lived in Asgard.

It was believed that the land of the giants was separated from Asgard by the River Iving, a magical river that never freezes over. One of the three Wells of Wisdom is located here (Mimir’s). Ruled by a fearsome King named Utgard-Loki, the land was protected by a stronghold called Utgard. Carved from blocks of snow and ice, it was so large that one couldn’t see the top of it.

Vanaheim

This realm was home to the Vanir race of gods, an ancient branch of the pantheon noted for their skills in magic. Their most noted gift was foresight, the ability to predict future events. Appropriately, this realm of magic is hidden to some extent, so there are no descriptions of its environment. It is also noted in the lore as the

home of Njord and his children, Freya and Freyr, who took refuge here after the Aesir-Vanir war ended.

Alfheim

If there are giants, then it is not strange that there are elves in Norse myth as well. Alfheim is where the light elves as they were called lived. Located next to Asgard, it is home to these “guardian angels”, although they were also known to use their powers to hinder humans. These minor gods of nature and fertility were also believed to be muses to the arts.

Svartalfheim

If there are light elves, then it makes sense there would be the opposite to balance things out. And Svartalfheim was home to just such magical but hideous creatures. They despised the sun and chose to live underground. In fact, the Norse believed that if one of these dark elves was exposed to the sun, it would be turned to stone. “Imps” may be a good way to describe the as they were thought to be responsible for the annoyances in life.

That annoyance particularly surfaced in the form of nightmares. Very literally, these elves were also called mares” and were responsible for causing the frightening images in your sleep, even the terrors that gripped animals.

Nidavellir

Okay. So we have gods, goddesses, giants, elves—what is missing? Well, if you are a student of myth as well as magic, it would be dwarves. And in Norse myth, dwarves lived in Nidavellir.

A rocky world, it provided the perfect home to the dwarves. Found under rocks, in caves or even underground, dwarves were ruled by Hreidmar (his name means “dark fields”). As with many cultures’ lore, dwarves in Viking stories were master craftsmen. The multitude of revered and powerful weapons that gods like Thor or Odin wielded were actually gifts from the dwarves.

The World Tree

The idea of a tree of knowledge is not unique to Norse myth—Indo-European, Siberian and Native American traditions all have one. Even Christianity had the

Tree in Eden. With their roots buried deep in the soil, their strong trunks rising through the air and their branches reaching to the heavens, trees are symbols of a living link between the real and eternal worlds.

In Norse myth, Yggdrasil is the World Tree. It was believed to be the source of nourishment for all, gods and humans alike. Located in the middle of Asgard, its branches and roots spread to all the Nine Worlds. In fact, its roots are noted to be the locations of the three Sacred Wells: Urd's Well is at its first root in Asgard, Mimir's Well is in Jotunheim at the second root and Hvergelmir's Well is found in Niflheim at the third root.

Believed to be eternally green, Yggdrasil was an Ash tree. It runs like a pole or an axis through the Nine Worlds and connected all living things as well as all plains of existence. The Norn mentioned above lived at Urd's Well and were responsible for establishing the laws that humans were to follow as well as being the holders of past, present and future.

The Tree is also home to mystical creatures. It was believed that atop the tree lived a great eagle, defending Hvergelmir was a fierce dragon, and running back and forth between, a squirrel named Ratatosk. An impish trouble maker, he did everything he could to fan the flames of animosity between the eagle and the dragon. Already sworn enemies, their fight never ended because the squirrel kept passing on anything they said about each other.

Chapter 5—The Myths and Legends

The similarities between ancient civilizations' mythological beliefs is strong and surprising. However they may differ in how they believed the universe was created, why there was a cycle of life, or where we end up after death, they all had myths explaining it. Certain themes and even events are common whether it be Christian, Egyptian, Greek or Pagan. And Norse mythology covers a period in their history both Pagan and Christian. Here are a few of the Norse myths and legends.

The Myth of Creation

A cosmogony is the explanation of how the universe and the world we live on came into being. In most cultures, the stories all begin with there was nothing, a darkness, a void… In Norse storytelling, that void was called Ginnungagap. It was between the elemental fire Muspelheim and the world of elemental ice called Niflheim.

The myth goes that the frost and flames grew closer until one day they met and the fire began to melt the ice. From the water produced, Ymir the first giant was formed. He could reproduce alone (as a hermaphrodite, an entity with both sex organs) and from his sweat alone the race of giants was born.

The waters continued to run and Audhumbla was revealed—the first cow. She provided milk to feed Ymir and was given salt licks as her reward. As the cow licked the salt, Buri was freed. The first Aesir god, he produced a son named Bor. Bor married the giant Bestla, uniting the gods and giants.

The half-god, half-giants that resulted from Bor's and Bestla's union were Odin, Vili and Ve—the Aesir Chief or King and his brothers. Man was still not in the picture. The gods killed Ymir and as one version goes, used his corpse to make the world. Oceans sprang from his blood, his skin and muscles were made into the ground, his hair was woven into the plants and trees, the clouds in the sky were his brain and his skull the sky itself.

Finally, the Aesir gods decided to create the first man and woman. Ask and Embla (note the likeness to Christian Adam and Eve, the first initials being the same) were fashioned from Ash and Elm and were made secure by a fence around the Norse "Garden of Eden" called Midgard.

The Myth of the Aesir-Vanir War

This is a myth about the only war fought between the two godly tribes. Though most of the folklore portrays the two factions as enjoying a relatively harmonious and mutually respectful relationship, it was not always the case.

The myth begins with Freya… In the world of seers and magical arts, Freya was recognized as the best at the art called *seidr*, using magic to identify and alter destiny. She was said to have plied her trade throughout the realms, selling her services from village to village.

One day, so the story goes, she found herself at Asgard, the home of the Aesir. The Aesir were impressed with her talents right away and eagerly asked for help. But their guilt got the better of them as they realized it was not worth breaking the laws of their tribe or betraying friends and family just to satisfy their own needs. Sadly, they took the guilt out on Freya, blaming her for their own weakness. They labelled her a *gullveig* ("gold-greed") and attempted to execute her for the crime. Three times they tried to burn her to death and three times she rose from the ashes, reborn.

The treatment of Freya created a rift that could not be healed between the Aesir and the Vanir tribes and finally erupted into full-scale war. The Aesir, being the warriors they were, fought with honor and standard weapons. The Vanir used their magic. The war raged on and on with one side seeming to take power, only to have the tides turned. The back and forth went on for a very long time, with no one holding sway for long.

Finally, they all became weary of the battle. As was the tradition in such situations, the two sides agreed to a truce and to pay tribute by sending hostages to live among the other tribe. Thus, Freya, Freyr and Njord of the Vanir came to live the Aesir and Hoenir and Mimir went to the Vanir.

Though the Vanir hostages lived peacefully, Hoenir and Mimir did not adjust to Vanaheim. The Vanir soon noticed as well that Hoenir was only able to deliver on his gift of wisdom if in the presence of Mimir. Suspicions grew and as it turned out Hoenir was slow-witted and lost without Mimir. His stock answer when questioned alone was "let others decide".

One too many times Hoenir avoided giving an answer and the Vanirs decided they had been cheated in the exchange—the value of the hostages was not equal. They acted violently, beheading poor Mimir and sending her severed head to Asgard.

Odin, distraught at the situation, took matters into his own hands. He chanted magic poetry over Mimir's head and embalmed it with magical herbs, so as to preserve it. In so doing, he knew he would be able to at least call on her for valuable advice when needed.

With both tribes reluctant to resume war over the misunderstanding, Aesir and Vanir came together and spat into a cauldron. From their mingled saliva came Kvasir, the wisest of all beings, and harmony was finally restored.

The Myth of Ragnarok

At the polar opposite end of the mythology timeline (but also somehow in between —you'll see what I mean later) is Ragnarok. Since 2012 and the countdown to the supposed end of the Mayan calendar, end of the world myths and legends from all cultures have been dusted off and explored. Like all other ancient cultures, the Norse believed that prophesies foretold of an end of the world scenario. But it also told of a rebirth and a continuing possibly never-ending cycle of beginnings and endings. Like the Ouroboros of Egypt who is birth, life, death and renewal as it consumes its own tail, so is the legend of Ragnarok.

Literally translated from the Old Norse as "The Doom of the Gods", this Norse myth is built on a series of prophesies. The first of these prophesies came to pass when Baldur was killed by Loki and sent to the underworld. It was said that the gods and goddesses realized not even they could escape destiny.

But they could prepare, at least some of them thought so. Odin built his ideal army, carefully choosing his best and most courageous human warriors to fight beside him against the giants. The giants had vowed to "devour the world".

In Midgard, humanity abandoned their traditions, left or broke bonds of fidelity and loyalty and basically became despondent and apathetic. Why should they care? Nothing mattered any more. The wheels had been set in motion with Baldur's death, just as the fates foretold. Other than Odin, even the deities began to feel doubt and broke their [promises. As three winters came in a row, with no sign of summer Sun to relieve the suffering or break the darkness, all realized the next prophesy had come: the Fimbulwinter (the Great Winter) was upon them.

Finally, Loki and his son, the terrifying and vicious wolf Fenrir, broke from their jail (where they had been placed to prevent further disaster) and set about destroying the

Nine Realms. The World Tree itself began to tremble.

Heimdall, the watchman and protector of Asgard, was the first to manage to gather information about the giants' preparations. And he was shocked to see Loki in their midst, at the helm of the Naglfar, the Ship of the Dead. Sounding the alarm on his Gjallarhorn, the Resounding Horn, Heimdall tried to jolt the gods from their apathy.

The giants launched their attack, their goal to destroy the homes of the gods and goddesses and then the universe itself. Fenrir ran across the land, his lower jaw on the earth and his upper jaw touching the sky itself, and in his wake he left nothing. All was consumed by the wolf, even the Sun itself. Surt followed, rapidly reducing the world to nothing but raging flame with his sword.

The deities fought valiantly to the bitter end, but it was too late. Thor and the serpent ended up killing each other, as did Freyr and Surt, Heimdall and Loki; Odin and Tyr were killed by Fenrir. But vengeance was had when Vidar, Odin's son, finally ended the wolf.

Finally, as if to reverse creation itself, Midgard sank back into the seas and vanished under the dark waters. The silence of the beginning of time returned to the universe. Ginnungagap reigned again.

Then, in true rebirth fashion, the myth of Ragnarok tells that the world rose again. Baldur returned and the Earth celebrated by bearing more fruit and being more fertile than ever before.

Two new humans, Lif and Lifthrasir, were born and set to repopulating the new, improved Midgard. And the gods and goddesses resumed their rightful places.

Now, this myth rests on the idea that this had already happened before now, yet it also is yet to come (if we were still to follow the Old Norse). Makes for a great mystery.

Conclusion

The myths presented above are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. There are dozens more, carefully preserved for all time from the oral traditions of the skalds and the later writings of the Christian missionaries. The world of the Norse tribes and the deep, intricate mythology they created to explain it is just the beginning of what you can learn from the culture. Like so many ancient societies, the mythology was wound into everyday life and sustained the people through life's many challenges.

The geography of the Teutonic peoples in particular colors all of the myths. Whether it be the landscape of one of the realms or the talents of a god, you can see their real world experience in each. It is interesting too to compare the myths against other cultures of the same time period.

The Norse in the end were a proud and fierce people living in a harsh, sometimes cruel, landscape and somehow they managed to create epic poems and legends that live on today. Like the Egyptians, something about the majesty and scope of their gods and goddesses captured North American imagination and continues to inspire modern artistic projects even now. Think of the television series and the movies of recent years.

You may want to revisit some of the modern interpretations with this new knowledge in mind. With this information, you will find a better appreciation for the details and perhaps even catch a few mistakes. However, you use your new knowledge, it is up to you.

Thank you again for downloading this book!

I hope it was able to help you to with your quest to find out more about Norse mythology and the life of the Vikings.

Finally, if you enjoyed this book, would you be kind enough to leave a review for this book on Amazon?

Thank you and good luck!